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ABSTRACT

Attempting to determine how best to investigate the developmental consequences of social change, this talk discusses and comments on (1) recent research on the family as a world in which children grow up; in particular, the shift away from focusing upon the mother-child relationship as the influence of overwhelming importance in early childhood to an exploration of the mutual influence of family relationships; (2) the issue of change/stress within and upon the family as an influence on children's development; (3) recent research into the links between women's own experiences as children and their parenting behavior; and (4) which strategies are the most sensitive and appropriate for investigating these issues in other contexts. (RH)

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Studying Parents, Children and Changes in the Family

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Judith F. Dunn

Children all over the world grow up in families. They develop their powers of understanding—of themselves and of others, of the world in which they live—their personalities, emotional and social well-being and within a network of relationships with mother, father, grandparents, siblings, cousins, neighbours and friends. This complex network of relationships, the family, is, in the West, changing in a number of well-documented ways. There are increasing numbers of mothers who are full-time employed, of single-parent families and of children brought up in group care. Social change and stressful events have, in all cultures, an impact on children by changing patterns of child-rearing, regardless of the stage of industrialisation or modernisation of the nations, as emphasised in a recent Unesco Symposium on the Family.

The question of how we can best investigate the developmental consequences of these changes for children is an urgent one. Psychologists are increasingly aware of the limitations of research that focuses upon parent-child relationships in isolation from the family world of the child and from the broader social context. In cross-cultural work, it is of particular importance to study children's development within a framework that is not restricted to an examination of the behaviour of parents with children. This paper is concerned with two main themes: the developmental implications of first, a focus upon family interaction rather than parent-child relationships; and second, the changes in family relationship that follow stressful events or social change.

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These two themes are important for children growing up all over the world. To stress how *commonly* important these themes are is not to suggest, of course, that one draws simple lessons from research into these issues in one part of the world which can be applied to families in other parts of the world and other cultures. It is clearly urgent for us to understand more clearly the relations between particular cultural settings, family patterns, and the development of children. While this is not the topic of my paper, it is hoped that one of the products of this Workshop will be collaborative research that allows us to begin to explore these relationships. It cannot be emphasised too strongly how much developmental psychology does benefit from careful systematic research in cultures other than the Western one from which 'universalisations' are frequently made.

However, while simple extrapolations from studies of, for instance, the effects of social stress in Britain to studies of the effects of urbanisation on families in an African country would clearly be grossly misleading, it seems to me important that we should try to see whether there are indeed general principles which research in the West has uncovered in examining these two themes, principles which might be relevant and applicable to research into the development of children in other parts of the world. At the very least, there are certain method logical lessons to be drawn that are important in thinking about research strategies. This talk discusses and comments (1) recent research into the family as a world in which children grow up, in particular, the shift away from focusing upon the mother-child relationship as the influence of overwhelming importance in early childhood to an exploration of the mutual influence of family relationships; (2) the issue of change/stress within and upon the family as an influence on children's development; (3) recent research into the links between women's own experiences as children and their parenting behaviour; and (4) which strategies are the most sensitive and appropriate for investigating these issues in other contexts.

PARENTING AND THE FAMILY

The bulk of research on parenting attempts to establish patterns of relations between aspects of parental functioning and characteristics of the children. As Maccoby and Masters comment in a recent review, 'Certain consistent themes have appeared in many studies involving different methods of assessment and different outcome variables, so that a picture of what constitutes 'competent' or 'skillful' parenting is beginning to emerge'. In reviewing research on Western families, they characterise

successful parenting as on a 'authoritative reciprocal pattern'. But they stress that

> the trends are sufficiently weak that it is evident that there must be a very large number of exceptions to them. There are many cases in which either authoritarian or permissive parenting seems to work as well as the authoritative-reciprocal pattern that emerged as optimal in a number of studies.

And they note that

> However, we have given more attention to the positive findings than to the studies in which no significant relationships have emerged. And in most cases, the relationships that have appeared are not large, if one thinks in terms of the amount of variance accounted for. Many studies involve the measurement of a fairly large number of characteristics of both parents and children, so that the question must be raised as to whether the number of significant correlations exceeds the number to be expected by chance. In the long run, the only way to pick out the robust findings is replication.

There is a further limitation in this research on parenting and the conclusions drawn from it. Not only is there a question of the number of significant correlations expected by chance but also a very important fact is omitted from most discussion of the effects of parenting styles on children. If we look at different children brought up within the same family siblings who share 50% of their genes as well as a common family world, then we find that in measures of personality, intelligence, and psychopathology, these children differ from one another almost as much as totally unrelated children brought up in different families. It is a notable finding which implies strongly that there is very little impact of the physical environment that parents provide for children and parental characteristics that must be essentially the same for all children in a family, for example, education or the quality of the relationship between the spouses. Indeed, the implications are either that parental behaviours have no effect or that the only effective aspects of parenting must vary greatly from one child to another within the same family. Why should the children within a family differ so dramatically? There are a number of possible processes which could contribute to the differences: differential treatment of the siblings by the parents; direct effects of the siblings upon one another and 'ecological niche-picking', in Scarr's terms. Here, importance of these different processes are illustrated with some examples from recent research.

(1) The different relationships within the family affect one another. The arrival of a sibling, for instance, dramatically affects the relationship

between a mother and her first born. In families in which the mother or father has a close relationship with the first born, the relationship that develops between the siblings is likely to be hostile, especially if the first child is a daughter. The relationship between siblings also affects the parent-child relationship. If we take seriously the importance of the parent-child relationship, we should take account of the impact of the siblings upon that relationship.

(2) Siblings have a direct impact upon one another. Their influence is demonstrated, for instance, in imitative behaviour and in the shaping of aggressive behaviour; siblings are particularly important in the acquistion and transmission of cultural knowledge, even in the preschool years. Examples will be given from Samoa, Papua, New Guinea and the United Kingdom.

(3) Individual differences in the affective quality of the sibling relationship are stable from early infancy to childhood.

(4) It is not birth order or sibling status that accounts for the marked individual differences in sibling relationships. The affective quality of the relationship is largely independent of these variables but is closely related to the quality of the parent-child relationship.

These findings illustrate the close connections between the sibling and parent-child relationships, and the developmental importance of the sibling relationship (largely ignored until recently). But within the family, of course, it is not just the relationships between siblings and parents that are closely linked; the relationship between mother and father is a crucially important aspect of the family system. Rutter, for instance, demonstrated that loss of a parent through death is not associated with the subsequent development of antisocial behaviour in children whereas loss through divorce or desertion is. Interparental discord and disharmony are associated with children's subsequent antisocial behaviour whether there has been a marital breakup or otherwise. Marital discord rather than loss of a parent appears to be a key predictive factor. We know little, however, about the dynamics of the process. Marital problems and discord disrupt parenting behaviour; there is also evidence for the opposite effect – that support from one adult for the other partner is linked to improved parenting. Rutter, studying the impact of divorce on children, found that in a sample of inner-city families, the negative effects of familial disruption on the children's future behaviour were mitigated if the mother remarried or otherwise entered into a supportive relationship with an adult partner.

Not only do many parents give support to one another's child-rearing activities but they also serve to shield the child from negative effects that might otherwise stem from a spouse's weakness. Hetherington, Cox and Cox, and Rutter report a 'buffering' process whereby the impact of an

emotionally unstable or otherwise incompetent parent on a child is moderated by the presence and availability of a more stable parent. Thus, if either parent is functioning well, the child is unlikely to show disturbances in development. Quoting Maccoby and Masters, 'The implications of the work on family systems is clear. Research that attempts to understand child outcomes entirely from the perspective of mother-child interaction is leaving out an important influence on child development'. In our attempt to study the influence of the social environment in which children grow up, it is the *family* rather than the parents we should focus upon.

The examples of the effects of the birth of a sibling and of divorce of parents bring me to the second issue.

STRESS, SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE FAMILY

Most children in the West experience major changes in their environment during their first 5 or 6 years such as separation from the mother or experience of group care as well as the more extreme changes such as separation of the parents or periods in institutional care. How do these changes affect children and how far is the parent-child relationship implicated in the nature of the child's response to these changes?

First, it is important to note that it is not useful to consider stress or the emotional tension that different changes in the environment induce as a unitary phenomenon. The effects on children of divorce, bereavement and separation from the mother or periods in hospital are different. The questions that we now have to elucidate are specific rather than general. What is it about particular life events that makes them predispose children to particular disorders? What kinds of disorder follow which kinds of events at which stages of development? Neither a general notion of 'stress' nor an itemisation of the general factors associated with vulnerability or resilience can help us greatly towards answering these questions. What must be emphasised is that the effects of the different kinds of stressful change in the family are different not only in the form of children's response but also probably in the form of parental response as well and by implication in the processes linking event and outcome.

We are now at a stage of asking precise and specific questions about the consequences of particular events at different stages of parents' and children's lives. Beyond this general point, there are two particular problems involved in relating a general notion of stress to children's development. The first concerns individual differences. The notion of what is a stressful happening in early childhood is closely linked to the issue of individual differences, not only in children's responses to the event but in the response of parents also and in each family member's response to the others' altered behaviour. It is not simply the point that some children find particular experiences stressful and others do not. It is a more com-

plicated matter, involving family patterns of response. Garmezy has argued convincingly for the importance of individual differences in children's temperament in his discussion of resilience. We now have evidence that temperamental differences between children are closely related not only to the way in which they respond to changes in their environment but also to the persistence of behaviour problems following such changes.

Data will be presented to illustrate this point showing, for instance, that an increase in persistence of anxious worrying and fearful behaviour after a sibling birth is systematically related to temperamental characteristics assessed before birth. However, it is clear that we should not regard such temperamental differences as completely independent of the quality of the relationship between child and parent. Although temperamental differences are not simply attributable to differences in parental perception of the child, they are closely related to differences in parental behaviour. This means that it cannot be assumed that the link between temperamental differences and children's response to stressful events is one that does not involve differences in parental behaviour.

In considering the association between individual differences in children's response to stressful events and family patterns of interaction, we face then a central question about the processes linking stressful events to dangers in children's behaviour. How far and in what ways are changes in family interaction implicated in the development of disorder or developmental changes following social change? With the birth of a sibling, for instance, the development of behaviour problems was found to be linked not only to the children's temperament but also to the marked changed in the interaction between mother and first born that accompanied the sibling birth. Noth only did the children become more difficult, miserable or withdrawn but also their mothers tended to become more restrictive and punitive and less playful and attentive. In any attempt to understand the process linking the initial event – in this case the sibling birth–to the later behaviour problems, we should take account of not only the child's initial response but also the parental behaviour related to that response. This point that the consequences of stressful events for a child's development will depend on the patterns of family interaction that follow illustrates one way in which the 'transactional' processes emphasised by many developmental psychologists may be important. Research into the consequences of divorce provides another example. Divorce imposes major stress upon all members of the family system. In the study by Hetherington and her colleagues, a group of families were followed for several years after divorce. The interactions of each parent with the children were observed on several occasions. The study was initiated at the time the legal divorce took place, usually following a period of marital separation. At this time, the target children were 4 years old; in all the families included in the study, mothers were the custodial parent and fathers had visiting rights. The initial reports of the study chart a deteriorating relationship

between parents and children. During the first year following divorce, mothers, on the average, became more authoritarian, increasing their number of direct commands and prohibitions, and decreasing their responsiveness and affection-giving. The children, especially the boys, became less complaint and more aggressive. There was also a breakdown in family organisation and routine. The children's relationship with the fathers changed but in a different way. The fathers tended to withdraw from participation in rule enforcement, discipline and management of the children's routines. There was an increase in indulgence and gift-giving. By the time two years had passed since the legal divorce, there was evidence that the balance in parent-child relationships was being restored. Fathers were becoming stricter, mothers more patient and communicative, and children more cooperative. But the restoration occurred at greatly varying rates in different families, the rate depending on a variety of factors such as the formation of new intimate relationships by one or both the parents, the mothers' employment, and the economic stability of her household.

Crises do not always disrupt family functioning. Some families cope effectively with difficulties, others do not. What factors affect family reactions to stress and change? The importance of social support systems is becoming clear. George Brown's work on depression in women, for instance (which is closely linked to depression in their children) shows that the impact of crises on women is dramatically decreased if they have intimate friends. And following divorce, too, the continuing support of the former husband affects the mother-child relationships which deteriorates much less if the father visits the children frequently and takes an active part in child-rearing.

The close link between maternal depression and child depression brings us again to the question of what particular processes and patterns of influence within the family are implicated in such associations. To emphasise the mutual influence of mother and child is not new; it is the clinical significance of the link between maternal and child behaviour in the depression studies that makes it all the more crucial that we should begin to trace the patterns of influence within the family with more accuracy and not simply to refer to mutual effects.

A second problem with the notion of stressful social changes is closely related to this issue of changed patterns of family interaction. Does the notion of 'stress' refer to a 'happening', an 'event', or does it apply to chronic circumstances that continue over time? The concept is frequently used in a confusing way with regard to the distinction between a *life-event* and *difficult circumstances*. It is interesting that the notion of 'coping' is seen as adaptation over time while stresses are sometimes seen as on-off events. But this may be very misleading. It could well be that what links the initial environmental change with the development of behavioural disorder or depression is a long-term change in family interaction. Many

stressful changes in children's lives such as the separation or divorce of parents or the loss or illness of one parent are also very likely to involve marked and long-term changes in the interaction between parent and child. Two studies of attempted suicide have shown that the association between early loss of parent and suicidal ideation is strongly linked to the long-term consequences of the loss for family organisation:

> Our data indicate that when the family has accommodated successfully to loss or has been adequately reconstituted through remarriage or the presence of alternative surrogate parental figures, suicidal trends are unlikely to develop. On the other hand, when the disruption has resulted in major and longstanding family disorganisation, a predisposition to suicidal thinking is very probable and the likelihood that this could result in suicidal behaviour later in life is high.

It seems very probable that *differences* in the way in which family interaction patterns are affected are implicated in the *different* consequences of divorce, bereavement, separation and so on. Furthermore, the link between initial event and long-term change in family interaction patterns could well be important in understanding 'sleeper effects' – why, for example, the immediate grief reactions of very young children to bereavement may be very short term yet the long-term effects may be marked.

It is, then, surely important to examine the relation between specific events and chronic difficulties. But there is so much that we do not know about children's response to chronic stressful circumstances. Are children less affected than adults by day-to-day frustrations and difficulties? They certainly behave in the immediate context as if such frustrations were very difficult to bear. Are they less or more likely than adults to respond to such difficulties with 'learned helplessness'? How does this change with age? The importance of understanding the relation of a child's cognitive maturity – what he or she understands about the events and behaviour of the people of his world – is not the topic to be considered.

In the work on adult depression, there has been increasing attention to the meaning of life events to the person involved – the 'thoughts we have about the world and ourselves'. But there are obvious difficulties in relating this notion to the behaviour of very young children and any attempt to do so raises absolutely central questions about our understanding of children and their development. Our inferences about the meaning of an event to a child depend on our assumptions about the nature of the child's understanding of the world and himself and for young children, this is a very contentious issue. Disagreements about children's capabilities, particularly in the area of social cognition and the understanding of emotions, are marked, and the view that we have systematically underestimated children's understanding is increasingly widely held.

But the disagreements are not easily resolved; the difficulties facing the researcher here are enormous. How do we address the question of the meaning of an event or set of circumstances to an 18-month-old? How can we begin to understand their thoughts or feelings?

Seligman and Peterson's work on the links between maternal and childhood depression in 9 year-olds suggests that there is a close link between a mother's 'attributional style' and that of her child, and that both are linked to the development of depression following stressful events. The correlations given do not allow us to come to any definite conclusions on whether children's attributional style leads to depression or maternal attributional style influences children's attributional style. But the close link between both maternal and children's attributional style and depressive symptoms suggests that one fruitful way to pursue the origins of childhood depression and possible links with stressful events might be to look at the conversations between even younger children and their mothers. One hint that the processes involved may begin very early in children's lives comes from the analysis of family conversations in two longitudinal studies of children we are just completing in Cambridge, England. In the studies we were interested, in part, in the nature of conversations which mothers and children held about other people, responsibility and blame, and social rules. The studies show, first, that young children, even those of 3 years and under, were interested in psychological causality but that there were marked differences in how the mothers responded to this interest and the extent to which they discussed motives, intentions, and feelings of others. Two sets of findings illustrate how important these differences may be in the children's development. The first, from the study of the arrival of a sibling; in those families in which the mother discussed the newborn baby as a person with feelings, wishes and intentions, the children behaved with far more friendliness towards their siblings a year later than the children in those families in which such discussion had not taken place. The second, from a study of family conflict; in some families the mother, in dealing with conflict between the siblings, referred to the *feelings* of the second child while talking to the first; 6 months later, the second child in these families were more likely to appeal to the mother for help. Such findings suggest that mothers' conversations with their children about the behaviour of other people in the family and their attribution of motive and meaning may well have an important influence on even very young children. This issue is discussed under research methods and strategies.

My final point on social change and stress concerns the relation between stress and developmental change. Why is it that some children are remarkably resilient to traumatic change? And why is it that some stressful events can lead not only to 'coping' but also to developmental advances? We are very far from understanding what processes may be involved in these changes. In the study of children's responses to the birth of a sibling,

over half the children made remarkably rapid developmental advances in the period immediately following the sibling birth and it was argued that the changes in the children's world that the birth involved in particular the change in care giver, for the days surrounding the birth could well have contributed to these developmental advances.

> It is certainly plausible that a shift in the routine of the child, and in what is expected of him by the care giver, might lead the child to discover for himself that he *can* do certain things, and that such achievement is enjoyable, whether it be mastering a difficult task like putting on a shoe, or conquering his fear of going to the toilet alone, or discovering that he has resources for play within himself.

There are three different possibilities here that need to be distinguished: the first is that with a different care giver, different requirements are placed on the child; the second is that the new care giver has different expectations and beliefs concerning the child. He or she attributes intentions and interprets the child's behaviour differently than the mother does. With both these interpretations, the explanation for the changed behaviour lies in the moulding by the *adults* of the child's actions. A third possibility is to view the altered behaviour as essentially a response by the *child* to an altered environment; if you greatly change the world of a child (or indeed of an adult), the chances are that you will not only draw his attention to new possibilities in the world but also to new possibilities in himself as an actor in that world. It may be that with a change in care giver, both the first two effects are operative. With either kind of change in the care giver, though, the consequence is likely to be a change in the child's feelings, beliefs, and ways of acting in the world.

The individual differences between children in the nature and extent of these developmental advances were marked and clearly this is an important area for further research. Are there some stages of development when particular experiences of change may be helpful to particular children? It is already known that the experience of routine separation from the mother during the first 2 years of life may buffer the child against the traumatic consequences of major separations from her. Just as it is important to study the whole family in order to understand the process linking event to disorder, it is also important to understand why some experiences lead to an increase in 'coping' or to rapid developmental change. We need to study not only the individual children but their whole families' response to the change. Seligman and Peterson's work suggests that one aspect of their response that could well be important is the attributional style of family members. The clinicians' work on the consequences of stressful change has an important lesson for developmental psychologists. It raises the question of what role sharp changes in the social environment may play in 'normal' development. How far, for

instance, are the changes in self-concept at adolescence discussed in relation to suicide and linked to the changes in schooling and the social world that are experienced by adolescents in the United States and Europe? Would such changes be apparent in cultures in which the pattern of social experience of adolescents is very different? Cross-cultural studies which examined the relation between the timing of changes in adolescent social experience (such as initiation rites and transition to the adult world) and changes in self-concept would be very useful.

It is ironic that discountinuities in the early development of children should so often be attributed to maturational change and the impact of parents, the main *environmental* influence on children's development *being assumed to be continuous*, while biologists have shown the profound importance of sharp environmental transitions (weaning, for instance) in contributing to discontinuities in development. The discontinuities in social experience and expectation imposed by changes from home to preschool, from home to school and from junior school to high school must surely have profound effects on children's views of themselves, their families, and other people. Research on children's response to stressful change not only addresses questions of major clinical importance but also reminds us that changes in the social environment may be centrally important in accounting for transitions in normal development.

SIGNIFICANCE OF A MOTHER'S OWN CHILDREN EXPERIENCES

The final topic is one seen by psychiatrists to be of major importance in parenting behaviour. How does a mother's own experience of being mothered, as a child, affect her behaviour towards her own child? The findings from Rutter's recent study will be briefly commented on as they illustrate two important points made in the context of the earlier discussion: the importance of a supportive relationship in adolescence or adulthood in ameliorating the effects of stress and difficulty, and the long-term consequences of childhood experiences.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH STRATEGIES

Finally, what themes from the research which have been described have general implications for research on parenting all over the world? Research strategies must be sensitive to the importance of examining different levels of influence on the child.

(1) A combination of epidemiological research with detailed observational methods is likely to be particularly useful e.g. Rutter's study of mothers' childhood experiences.
(2) The mutual influence of different family relationships must be examined.

(3) The importance of studying the conversations and discourse as well as 'conventional' parenting variables should be recognised.

(4) The relation of family to cultural context must be examined. Cross-cultural studies are of great importance; however, researchers must remain sensitive to the point that the range of individual differences within a cultural group may be greater than the range of differences between individuals from different cultures.

(5) Finally, research into families should be conducted over time. The importance of longitudinal research cannot be overemphasised.